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AUTHOR Reid, John Y.; Rogers, Sharon J.
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ABSTRACT

A sample of colleges and universities that advertised for a provost or vice president for academic affairs in 1979 was studied to determine participants' perceptions of search committee operations. For 45 participating schools, useable questionnaires were returned by 253 search committee members, 31 successful job candidates, and 25 department heads. Among the topics covered in the questionnaire are the following: the mechanics of the search process, details of committee composition, perceptions of the participation of various campus groups, reasons for candidate selection, and background data about members and successful candidates. Institutional size and type of institutional control were found to be very useful for distinguishing differences among career patterns of successful candidates. To qualify for a position as a chief academic officer, experience as a dean and other full-time administrative experience was usually more important than experience as a department chair in large, public institutions. The reverse was true in small, private institutions. The findings suggest that committee members do not select candidates who represent themselves "writ large" in professional terms or in demographic terms. In the five years preceding the search, more successful candidates than members had published books, chapters, or monographs, and more had at least one article in a national journal. Other differences are noted. Additionally, distinct differences emerged between committee members and the pool of candidates they select for consideration on several demographic variables (sex, race, age). The three study groups had quite different perceptions about what criteria were most important in the selection process. (SW)

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The Search for Academic Leadership: Selecting Chief Academic Officers in American Colleges and Universities

John Y. Reid
Director, Center for the Study of Higher Education and
Chairman, Department of Higher Education
The University of Toledo

and

Sharon J. Rogers
Assistant Dean, Library and Learning Resources
Bowling Green State University

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Association for the Study of Higher Education

The George Washington University / One Dupont Circle, Suite 630 / Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 296-2597

This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C. March 3-4, 1981. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Search committees constitute a relatively recent phenomenon on the academic scene. While their origins are shrouded in mystery,[1] they are used at present to select persons who perform highly visible, significant roles in colleges and universities. This study increases knowledge about the search process by providing statistical data about participants' perceptions of search committee operations at the provost or academic vice president level.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

The professional literature about search committees can be divided into four categories: 1) a large body of writing dealing with presidential searches;[2] 2) anecdotal, "cookbook" pieces in which persons who have participated in a search process, or processes, make general procedural suggestions;[3] 3) descriptive articles in which the whole process or parts of it are discussed in quite general terms;[4] and 4) a small number of research efforts which actually use statistical data, and/or theory in analyzing search procedures.[5]

The sociological literature on complex organizations provides theoretical frameworks for analyzing the operation of search committees in universities, and several theoretical orientations were used to organize the current study. However, the limited scope of this paper allows the delineation of just one. The study was guided by A. J. Grimes' criticism[6] of A. W. Gouldner's research[7] on cosmopolitans and locals, two latent role types which are likely to be triggered during the search process due to the types of tasks search committees are asked to perform. Grimes conducted research on university faculty members and demonstrated the validity of a five-dimensional model of the cosmopolitan - local construct: "professional commitment, commitment

to organizational goals, organizational immobility, concern for advancement, and reference group orientation. These dimensions are significantly correlated to selected biographical, behavioral, and organizational variables."[8] While rejecting the traditional view that professionals hold "predominantly either a professional orientation (cosmopolitan) or an organizational orientation (local)" and claiming that "professionals can hold both cosmopolitan and local orientations simultaneously," the thrust of Grimes' argument is that the cosmopolitan - local construct can be useful if it is not "reified by researchers neglecting the problems in substantive classification models."[9]

METHODS

The population for the study was the 73 institutions of higher education that advertised for a provost or vice president for academic affairs in The Chronicle of Higher Education in the first six months of 1979. Forty-five schools agreed to provide the names of members and chairs of search committees and the names of successful candidates. Separate questionnaires were sent to the three groups. Usable questionnaires were returned by 253 committee members (55%), 31 successful candidates (69%), and 26 chairs (58%). Topics covered in the questionnaires included the mechanics of the search process, details of committee composition, perceptions of the participation of various campus groups, reasons for candidate selection, and background data about members and successful candidates.

Although the participating institutions overrepresented institutions in category 1 of the Carnegie classification and underrepresented institutions

in Carnegie category 3*, there was no statistically significant difference between the distribution of cases in the sample and the distribution of the Carnegie cases ($.1 < \rho < .2$).[10] Since there was also no statistically significant difference between participating and non-participating institutions ($.3 < \rho < .5$), the sample used in this study is representative of the distribution of such institutions in the Carnegie population, and it is possible to generalize from the results.

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential techniques. All findings were further evaluated in terms of institutional control (public or private) and size (2,000 or fewer students or more than 2,000), in keeping with the conventions of the professional higher education literature. A measure of cosmopolitan and local orientation was constructed and used in the analysis of responses by successful candidates and members. A cosmopolitan was defined as a person with a high level of publication activity and national visibility, scoring above 5 on a measure constructed from reports of number of books and chapters published, number of papers presented at national conferences, number of articles in refereed journals, and number of professional offices held. A local, in contrast, was defined as a person scoring 5 or below on the same measure.

FINDINGS

Two, related major areas of the study are addressed in the findings reported here. First, dynamics operating in the search process are discussed, namely, the extent to which committees selected candidates like

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*Category 1: Doctorate-Granting Institutions
*Category 2: Comprehensive Universities and Colleges
*Category 3: Liberal Arts Colleges

themselves and the varying perceptions about reasons particular candidates were selected. Second, information about career tracks is presented.

The data available in this study suggest that committee members do not select candidates who represent themselves "writ large" in professional terms or in demographic terms. In the five years preceding the search, more successful candidates than members had published books (29% vs. 13.5%) and chapters or monographs (23% vs. 15.1%), and more had at least one article in a national journal (65% vs. 42.2%). The average total number of career publications for candidates was 16.7, for members 13.4. Forty-two percent of the candidates had held national office in a professional organization, as opposed to 20.2% of the members. The differences are summarized in the classification of 40% of the successful candidates as locals, compared to 70.3% of the committee members. Institutional control does not affect the distribution of cosmopolitans and locals (% local/public = 71; % local/private = 69). Size, however, does affect the distribution (% local/2000 or fewer = 82.1; % local/more than 2000 = 64.2).

Distinct differences emerge between committee members and the pools of candidates they select for consideration on several demographic variables. Thirty-three percent of the committee members were women, yet this presence was not translated into similar representation of female candidates in either the pool given serious consideration (11.3%) or the final pool of candidates (9.7%). The same pattern applies for race and age factors. For instance, 10.9% of the committee members belonged to ethnic minorities, but only 4.9% of those given serious consideration and 4.6% of those in final pools were ethnic minorities.

Differences in perceptions about what criteria were most important in the selection process cloud key issues. An illustration of one problem is

found in the case that when all three participant groups listed the major reasons for selection, they produced quite different ranked lists:

Successful Candidates	Committee Members	Committee Chairs
1. ability to communicate	1. experience	1. administrative experience
2. leadership	2. leadership	2. academic credentials
3. fiscal or budgetary expertise	3. scholarship	3. teaching experience
4. the ability to be a change agent	4. personality	4. leadership
5. scholarship	5. knowledge of the local situation	5. knowledge of the local situation
6. knowledge of the local situation	6. administrative ability	6. scholarship
7. experience	7. academic philosophy	7. personality
8. past performance	8. character	8. vision

Despite the fact that the three groups of participants evaluated the search process favorably, these lists suggest that substantive problems exist. The internal perceptual inconsistencies between and among the groups particularly highlight a problem related to the subject of career tracks. Specifically, given the discrepancies in the ranking of experience, one questions how important experience was in the selection process and what sorts of career experience candidates had.

Sixty percent of the successful candidates were cosmopolitans. Their average number of years in faculty rank was as follows: full professor, 5.3; associate professor, 4.6; assistant professor, 3.4. He or she had been tenured for 7.5 years. Successful candidates, on the average, had served as a department head for 4.6 years and as a dean for 3.8 years. Additionally, they had held other full time administrative positions for 2.6 years. In short, those chosen to be provosts or vice presidents for academic affairs had been in the professoriate for an average 13.3 years

and held full time administrative positions (i.e., years as a dean plus years in other full time administrative positions) for 6.4 years.

These means provide, however, a misleading portrait, for the analysis of individual cases in this study shows that the careers of those candidates chosen by large, public institutions differ from the careers of candidates chosen by small, private institutions. Those chosen by large, public institutions move through the assistant and associate professor ranks faster than their counterparts in small, private institutions (3.2 and 4.3 years vs. 4.0 and 4.7 years); but they spend more time as full professors (6.5 vs. 4.5 years). The most important differences between the two groups involve administrative experience.

Successful candidates at large, public institutions had an average of 8.0 years of previous full time administrative experience, compared with 2.5 years for those selected by small, private institutions. On the other hand, successful candidates at large, public institutions had served as a department head for only 2.9 years, as opposed to their counterparts who had served an average 6.8 years. Another way of stating the difference is to say that 74% of the successful candidates at large, public institutions listed service as a dean, and 54% had held other full time administrative positions. Fifty percent of the other group had served as a dean, and only 30% of the same group had held another full time administrative position. In contrast, 53% of those chosen by large, public institutions had been a department head, compared to 90% of those chosen by small, private institutions.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Evaluating the findings on career tracks reveals that the classic analytical distinctions of higher education literature, institutional size and type of institutional control, are very useful for distinguishing differences among career patterns of succesful candidates. To qualify for a position as a chief academic officer, experience as a dean and other full time administrative experience is usually more important than experience as a department chair in large, public institutions. The reverse is true in small, private institutions.

This study also suggests that the cosmopolitan - local construct labeling was less useful than the researchers expected for explaining behavior related to one institutional process. The fact that the researchers found few statistically significant differences in cosmopolitan and local perceptions of the process leads one to concur with Grimes that this appealing label should be employed judiciously. In short, the limited ability of the cosmopolitan - local label to provide conceptual clarity suggests researchers must rely on other sources for more substantive theoretical formulations.

One of the challenges of social science research is to interpret apparent discrepancies between what is reported and what is observed. The data available from this study suggest that discrepancies such as those involved in the participant groups' rankings of candidate criteria must be successfully explained if one is to understand the dynamics of the search process as it actually operates. Further research using the perspectives of unsuccessful candidates might well puncture the successful participants' complacency with the operation of the process. The most interesting

research, however, will focus on the dynamics operating to translate perceived institutional needs and preferences into an appropriate match with prospective candidates' perceived qualifications. The apparent confusion about institutional needs might be clarified by analyzing the perspectives of non-faculty and administrator participants in the search. Another alternative might be to gain access, for research purposes, to a limited number of on-going searches to gain impressions and evidence at several stages of the process, thus avoiding the cognitive dissonance that may operate to rationalize a decision that participants are being forced to live with for a period of time. Finally, similar studies about the search process for other higher education positions would yield refined information about differences in composition and behaviors of search committees, as well as details about some institutional patterns for articulating institutional needs.

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